Faster Progression of Addiction in Women

VISN 1 MIRECC researchers have confirmed the faster and more severe progression of several types of drug addiction in women. In the U.S., men are over twice as likely as women to be addicted to alcohol or drugs. However, women who are heavy alcohol drinkers have been shown to experience more rapid and severe medical and social consequences than men. This rapid progression, called "telescoping" arises from a variety differences in the way alcohol affects the bodies of men and women. Women experience higher alcohol blood levels after consuming the same amount. For women, heavy drinking is more likely to lead to liver disease, brain damage, mental impairment and reduced life span. This telescoping of the course of alcoholism translates into a shorter length time between the onset of heavy drinking and entrance into treatment for women. Telescoping has been less commonly studied for abuse of other types of drugs. The current study looked at the time course of substance use and associated negative effects in 271 men and women entering drug abuse treatment because of problems with cocaine, heroin, marijuana or alcohol. For heroin and marijuana women entered treatment after fewer years of regular use. Also, women reported more severe psychiatric medical and employment problems associated with any of the types of addiction, despite comparable amounts of drugs consumed. Overall, addiction progresses more rapidly for women who abuse drugs other than alcohol. The findings of the current study highlight the many ways that abused drugs have unique effects on men and women. This more rapid progression can both help and hinder success in treatment. Because women seek treatment after a shorter period of drug use, their conditions may be less entrenched. On the other hand, if treatment is unsuccessful further deterioration can be accelerated. Overall, women tend to benefit from treatment as well as men although they are less likely than men to be able to give up cigarette smoking. This research was done by University of Connecticut researchers Carlos Hernandez-Avila and Henry Kranzler and by MIRECC researcher Bruce Rounsaville.